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Indian Christians: Definition of Identity

Bruce Lawrence

INTRODUCTION

The Oneida, part of the Six Nations Confederacy of the Iroquoian nations of the Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Tuscarora, traditionally held a belief system of Iroquoian origin. But with the coming of the European Christian missionary there occurred a rift between Christian and Traditional Oneidas. While the Oneidas originally rejected the teachings, they gradually embraced aspects of it, eventually becoming known as being totally Christianized. In the Protestant churches of today, these Christians have maintained certain aspects of their ancient Iroquoian belief system. This paper examines a few of the more prominent aspects of their traditional belief system, and discusses them within the context of self-identity.

HISTORY

First on the North American continent were the Catholics: the Recollet and the Jesuit. Among the Oneidas worked such men as Peter Milet and Jacques Bruyar who lived many years alternately among the Oneidas, Onondagas, and Mohawks, and were in Iroquois lands for more than thirty years before the eighteenth century. Jesuit missionaries adopted Indian dress and names, and, according to Francis Halsey (1901) were often mistaken to be Indians as they went on distant and hazardous expeditions where they "astonished their savage audiences with the splendor and imposing rites and ceremonies of the Roman Church" (1901:43-44).

Later Jesuits did not have the same apostolic simplicity and were more properly the political agents of France. The English combated them with the help of Protestant missionaries who came to share in the struggle between Latin and Anglo-Saxon forces for supremacy over North America.

By the late 1700's, many Mohawks and Oneidas had converted to Protestant Christianity and were able to read and write. Many of them frequently acted as lay readers at church services, sometimes using the liturgy of Presbyterian and even Church of England services (Halsey 1901:82).

To the Oneida, conversion also meant civilization. When you became a Christian you would start to wear shirts and use a stove. Missionaries stated that they knew clothes didn't change hearts, but to the Indian they were related to the traditional religion. Education, civilization and Christianity were inseparable, and the mixed bloods who spoke both languages were the first to get education, go to church, and help the missionary (Halsey 1901:117).

The converts, however, found themselves at the bottom of two worlds. The "Praying Indians" were persecuted by pagans for leaving the traditional religion and by white Christians for retaining some of their pagan ways, considering them savage and inferior. Berkhofer writes that a rumor started that when a "Praying Indian" dies he goes to the Pagan heaven, but he is not let in because he has given up the old ways, and when he gets to the White heaven, God does not let him in because he

is Indian. So he is left to wander the earth in loneliness (Berkhofer 1965:122).

Syncretism occurred between traditional beliefs and Christianity. Samuel Kirkland wrote that he noticed the combination of religions occurring, complaining that though "Few Oneidas professed paganism in 1796, many were still influenced by their 'old mythology'" (Berkhofer 1965:122). Eventually there were enough converts dedicated to propagating Christianity that the Oneida Christians beseeched the Lord to grant "that we may love one another so well, that our pagan-brethren in the wilderness, may have a good example from us, and so learn what the religion of Jesus-Christ can do with Indians (Berkhofer 1965:122)." There were so many Christians among the Oneida that when the Seneca prophet, Ganeodiyo, or Handsome Lake, was travelling preaching his new religion, the Oneidas would not receive him (Morgan 1993:228).

Historically, the Oneidas as a whole responded fairly positively towards Christianity. The original resistance to missionaries grew into syncretism, which in turn grew so enthusiastic about Christianity that Handsome Lake never visited Oneida villages. However, since the late 1960s there has been an increase in the return to traditional ways, traditional religion, and traditional education. Following Pierre Trudeau's "White Paper" of June 1969, the National Indian Brotherhood (N.I.B.) issued a paper calling for Indian control of Indian education. Since then schooling has been slowly taken over by local bands (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill 1986:1-17). This increase in Native awareness, and the reaction to the Christian residential schools, where there have been a staggering number of cases of child abuse, has caused a turning away from Christianity, back to traditional beliefs.

DISAGREEMENT AMONG ELDERS AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE NEED FOR UNITY

Oneida on the Thames, located about 30 minutes south west of London Ontario, was formed around 1839 as a result of U.S. policy in the 1820s dedicated to removing Indians west of the Mississippi River (Morrison & Wilson 1986:317).. Numerous church buildings dot the reserve including United, Anglican, Pentecostal and two Baptist churches.

During the summer of 1993 I had frequent contact with the Traditional leaders of this Oneida reserve. Two very different attitudes towards the church are illustrated by the following. One Traditional leader, after I commented on the large number of churches on the reserve, replied that he had spoken to many of the "Christian people" and he felt that they were not "real Christian" in the way that they viewed the world. Another Traditional leader, while rhyming off a list of the many things the Traditional group wished to accomplish, mentioned that one of his group's goals was to have the churches kicked off the reserve. These two opinions seem contradictory at first. However, they present the same underlying feature. They both express the desire for unity on

the reserve. To the Traditional, the Christian is different, and represents the infiltration of white religion on the reserve.

The term "apple" is sometimes used to refer to those individuals who are "red on the outside, but white on the inside." One way to combat this internal division is to "kick the churches off the reserve." Another is to deny the difference, saying that "they're not 'real' Christians." Both eliminate the internal differences on the reserve, and present a united front against pressures from the Euro-Canadian society and government..

Allan Hanson (1989) describes a similar situation among the Maori people. They feel that two facets of their traditional culture are authentic, despite overwhelming evidence that they were fabricated in the past by colonial anthropologists and later incorporated into the history of the traditional Maori. S. Percy Smith created "Io" to appear like the Judeo-Christian God of Genesis, and "The Great Fleet" which is said to have been a fleet of canoes which were the original founding nations of the Maori. These fabrications helped to eliminate the "otherness" of the Maori which disturbed Europeans (Hanson 1989:890-893). There are perhaps some similarities between this situation and the Traditionals' desire to eliminate the 'otherness' presented by the Christians.

'Otherness' can also have, by the way, external political implications. James Clifford (1988) writes of the Mashpee people of Cape Cod, who lost a land claim because of a jury's decision that they were not a "tribe" during certain periods of their history. The decision was influenced in part due to the large number of Christians among the Mashpee and the mixing of Christian and Traditional belief systems.

While it is true that the Oneida Christians of Oneida on the Thames are different from the Traditional Oneida in their belief systems, they are not typical of the White Anglo Saxon Protestant population. Their expression of Christianity and their self-identity is distinctly Iroquoian.

A "TRADITIONAL" THANKSGIVING RITUAL

The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes, taken during a service at the Oneida House of Prayer on Oct. 10, 1993:

From the piano the female worship leader speaks to the congregation, "Who's gonna be first to testify?" From the congregation the first person to stand is a European Canadian who says, "I am thankful to God for the beautiful Fall colours, and I am thankful to have survived another year to experience another Thanksgiving.... I am thankful to be a part of this church and this reserve..."

Another person, an Onyota'a:ka this time, follows with her own thanksgiving that also begins with, "I am thankful to God for all He's done for me and having lived another year to share in another thanksgiving..." For a period of around ten minutes different people stand up and testify their thanks to God, beginning with their thanks for having lived another year to experience another Thanksgiving.

(Oneida Oct. 10 '93)

This type of thanksgiving is foreign to White Anglo-Saxon Protestant churches. Lewis Henry Morgan (1993:183) has traced a probable sources for this ritual. Of the six regular

festivals, or thanksgivings, observed by the Iroquois, the greatest festival was the Ki'yewanoskwakowa, or New Year's Jubilee, the occasion for the White Dog Sacrifice. During this Festival, the keepers of the faith would take a shovel full of ashes from an individual's fireplace, and sprinkle them on the hearth, and address the members of the house, as they were falling: "I thank the Great Spirit that he has spared your lives again to witness this New Year's celebration." After another shovel he would continue, "I thank the Great Spirit that he has spared my life, again to be an actor in this ceremony. And now I do this to please the Great Spirit (Morgan 1993:212)." He would conclude with thanksgiving to the Great Spirit, "that the lives of so many of them had been spared through another year" (Morgan 1993:217).

This thanksgiving to the Great Spirit for survival is most likely carried over directly to the Christian services. The thanksgiving to God for survival was not given, however, every Sunday. In the Longhouse festival, it was only given on certain festivals. Similarly this ritual is reserved for certain occasions in the Christian church. While the previous example occurred on Thanksgiving, and during another sermon, the pastor related a story about when he was preaching, and he discovered that there was a boy whose birthday it was. He then congratulated the boy and gave thanks to God for allowing him to survive another year (Oneida: Nov. 7). This aspect of thanking God for survival therefore seems to be a direct continuation of the traditional custom of thanking the Great Spirit for survival on special occasions.

A MIXED BIBLICAL MESSAGE

This fieldnote is from a sermon at the Oneida House of Prayer Nov. 7, '93:

The pastor says that brother X is an elder and he's been through different things that I haven't gone through so you can learn a lot from our elders. He then misquotes a verse, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him go to the elders and they will pray ..."
(Oneida Nov. 7 '93)"

The pastor does a fine job of exhorting the elders, but he misquotes the New Testament. The quote is actually a combination of two verses found in the New Testament. The first is James 1:5:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you (N.R.S.V.).

The second is James 5:15:

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven (N.R.S.V.).

He combines the first half of the first verse with the second half of the second verse to come up with a statement which is consistent with Iroquoian beliefs at the expense of New Testament theology, which in this case would state that any

person young or old can pray to God and receive wisdom. His quote gives the appearance that wisdom comes only, or at least mainly, from elders. Respect for elders, it would seem, is also a continuation of Iroquoian beliefs, though it is consistent with Christian beliefs.

Morgan states that reverence for the aged was one of the precepts of the ancient Iroquois belief system. One of the prominent aims of the first lawgiver, Daganowe'da, was to bind the people together by the family ties of relationship, creating a spirit of hospitality, and a lasting desire of social intercourse. After the establishment of the confederacy, their religious teachers, such as Soseha'wa, inculcated the duty of respect for elders. "It is the will of the Great Spirit that you reverence the aged, even though they be as helpless as infants (Morgan 1993:171).

CORPORATE VS INDIVIDUAL WORSHIP

Yrsos Kelistos is the hymn most often heard sung in the churches of the Oneida in the Oneidan language. It is sung to the tune of *Blessed Assurance*. Notice the character of the personal pronouns used in the hymns. In the English translation of the hymn, eight first person personal pronouns occur in the first two verses and the chorus. All eight occurrences of first person personal pronouns are in the singular form and consist of "mine" and "my." In the Oneida translation eleven first person personal pronominal prefixes occur. Only one of those is first person singular, the remaining 10 are all first person plural and consist of "us, you all and I," and "we all." This produces a dramatic contrast between the two hymns. The English hymn speaks of a personal isolated worship of God, while the Oneida hymn presents a communal worship. I would argue that this is a product of the worldview of each culture on the position of the individual.

In the English view, the "cult of the individual" is apparent. Often one will hear the idea that 'I'm an individual. No one is exactly like me in all the world. All people are unique like snowflakes—not one exactly the same as the other. Each to his (her) own.' Christianity has historically emphasized individual choice. It originated as a sect of Judaism, but within one hundred years of Christ's birth, people had to make an individual choice to become (or remain) a Christian or be ostracized from the synagogue. The trend continued as Christian missionaries make converts to Christianity often by individual choice.

In the Iroquoian worldview, however, the individual is part of the community as a whole. Individual rights are accounted for very differently in the Iroquoian system. Oneida hymns favour the *corporate* praise of Christ over *individual* praise as seen in the use of first-person plural pronominal prefixes, in direct contrast to the English hymn, which contains only singular, individual praise as seen in the use of first-person singular possessive pronouns.

The two hymns are different in other ways. Consider the variety of theological topics illustrated. The Oneida hymn contains three categories of theology: Christology (the study of who Christ was), praise, and soteriology (the study of salvation), whereas the English hymn contains two additional categories not contained within the Oneida hymn, eschatology (the study of end times) in its mention of rapture, and angelology (the study of angels).

CULTURAL CONTINUITY

The following is an excerpt from an informal interview with Pastor Cyril Abram:

Some missionaries from some country in Africa said "You Indians must give up these things. They belong to Satan." I said, "You use your drums and songs in your ceremonies?" He said "Yeah, but we pray over them and dedicate them to the Lord." I said "Well, why couldn't we do the same?" "Well" he thinks "I never thought about that" <laughter>

I heard some church in Curve Lake (?) They use their drum in the hymns. It sounds nice.

(Abram March 25 '94).

I asked Pastor Abram whether the attitude still exists that when an Oneida becomes a Christian they have to give up their culture, and if so, how much of their culture:

Most of it. We were taught that our ways, our old ways were wrong, and that we should give that up. Now you see in the Catholic and United church, The United church has written a letter to the people saying that we were wrong to say that you were wrong. The United church is getting in the tobacco. Our people used tobacco that only our people grew around here and we used it in ceremonies. But now they are mixing it with the Ojibwe sweet grass and cedar. So I warned my people "You know these things are coming, and it is wrong. We gave them up and we shouldn't go back to that." Shortly after that I was terminated, and I thought it was from the Lord. I didn't terminate myself. So that's how it occurred, and we looked around for a church to go to ...

(Abram March 25 '94)

This may at first appear to contradict what he said in the first quotation about elements of Native culture in the expression of Christianity. He had said earlier that it was fine to incorporate drums which were used in ceremonies into Christian worship, but in this case not the sweetgrass, cedar and tobacco. But when these elements are divided into categories a pattern appears. The sweetgrass, cedar and tobacco are all strictly elements of ceremony. The drum is an element of music as well as ceremony. The dual capacity of musical instruments to be part of the genre of ceremony (Sacred genre) and the genre of musical enjoyment (Profane genre) has perhaps allowed it to become accepted as an element of Christian worship. The Oneida language also has this dual capacity of appropriateness in Sacred and Profane genres.

CONCLUSION

The self-identity of the Christians among the Oneida of the Thames Reserve is both Oneida and Christian. While historically they disassociated themselves from the Traditional Oneidas, they remain distinct from the European Protestant population. In their expressions of Christian faith and worship, Oneidan churches exhibit certain aspects influenced by the Traditional Iroquoian belief system. Their own sense of self-identity was most succinctly summarised for me by Elanor

Abram, Pastor Ambram's wife: "We are Indians by race, and Christians by grace" (VBS July 13 '94).

APPENDIX: THE HYMNS

No. 27. BLESSED ASSURANCE

Ye-sos Ke-lis-tos, lo sen ni yoh
Jesus Christ, he.is.beautiful
Jesus Christ is beautiful
 1 Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Ka son na no lon ji yoh wen ja te
it.is.a.dear.name that it.is.on.the.earth
His is a dear name on the earth
 2 Oh, what a forecast of glory divine!

Shon kwen he ya se tyon kwe ho kon
he.to.us.has.died.for us.people
He has died for us, the people
 3 Heir of salvation, purchase of God,

Na te yoh li wa la wen he yen
why. he.die
That is why did he die
 4 born of His Spirit, washed in His blood

Chorus:

He twa no lon kwak, tyon kwe ho kon
you.all.&.I.love.him us.people
We, the people, love him
 1 This is my story, this is my song,

Ha kwa ji nya te we ni sla ke
quite that day.after.day
Day after day
 2 Praising my Savior all the day long;

He twa sen na yen te twa li wak
you.all.&.I.praise.him
We praise him
 3 This is my story, this is my song,

Se son kwen ten lon ne ne Ye-sos
again he.to.us.puts.back.in.place the.one Jesus
Jesus puts us back in place again
Jesus gives us grace again
 4 Praising my Savior all the day long.

Da ken ka di hak te nyen hen twe
give.it.to.me therefore elsewhere we.will.go.there
Therefore give it to me. We will go elsewhere

1 Perfect submission, perfect delight,

Ne tho nye he twe, ji nye sha we non
so.we.will.go.there that to.where.he.has.come.back.from
We will go to where he has come from

2 Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;

Lo li wa da don, hen twa tsen ni

he.has.made.things.obvious we.have.become.happy
He has made things obvious. We have become happy

3 Angels descendine, bring from above

Do kat hen he twa ya nen ha we
if if.we.follow.his.path
If we follow his path

4 Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
 I in my Savior am happy and blest;
 Watching and waiting, looking above,
 Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

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